



# TRUST ISSUES

An interview with Dr. Al Mathers, Head of Research, Good Things Foundation  
March 18th, 2021



*"My biggest takeaway ... is don't start with the digital interface, start back with the person's life, because the moment you're designing the interface [first], you've got it wrong."*

# WHY DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION NEEDS TO BE TURNED ON ITS HEAD POST-COVID

The commonly held view is that Covid-19 has greatly accelerated the adoption of digital technologies throughout business and society as people have had to find new ways to live their lives. But the rush towards digital has not benefited everyone equally - especially those who already lacked the confidence to acquire digital skills.

In this interview with **Dr. Al Mathers, Head of Research** at **Good Things Foundation**, we explore how organisations in both the commercial and charity sectors have been creative in tackling the double-headed challenge of digital exclusion during a pandemic. It highlights the importance of maintaining social networks as a precondition for digital ones; the increased value placed on blending in-person with digital engagement and the need for organisations to respond to changes in the behaviours and expectations of their stakeholders.

Above all, it suggests that a powerful opportunity now exists to re-think how organisations approach the whole concept of digital transformation if they are to survive and prosper in the post-Covid era.

**FourForty** | For those not familiar with Good Things Foundation, can you tell me a bit more about it, its vision and your role within it.

**Dr. Al Mathers** | Sure. Good Things Foundation is a digital social inclusion charity. We've been around since 2010 and our mission is to ensure that everyone benefits from digital. In that time we've helped over 3.5 million people not just here in the UK but also internationally. And it's all different kinds of people because digital is everywhere in life at the moment, affecting people of all ages from the smallest child to 101. Digital has become a kind of necessity and ensuring that everyone has access and isn't 'cut out' of the benefits is really, really important. That's kind of our whole world.

And my role - it's really interesting. I was very non-digital. My background is actually in landscape architecture, so was much more about drawing pens and paper. I came to the Good Things Foundation through a research route and was really interested in how to ensure greater participation of people in decision-making and in all the areas of life that affect them. So, my path

was to come in at the infancy of Good Things Foundation and really build a commitment to being evidence-driven - having that core security that we're making decisions based on evidence at all levels, that there is a need and that there are things that we can do to make a difference.

**FourForty** | So, clearly the past 12 months have seen a lot of movement in terms of people being forced into adopting digital technologies for their day-to-day life. But, even before Covid struck there was a growing concern about a 'digital divide' with groups of people in society who have not really engaged with the technology at all, or sufficiently in order to do many day-to-day activities that increasingly require access to the web. Do you think that gap has closed in the last year because people have been forced to use it, or has it in fact got worse?

**Dr. Al Mathers** | It has got worse. I think what we're becoming more aware of is that less people have the basic resources to navigate living a day-to-day life where you couldn't interact face-to-face and had to rely on digital means. One of the things we've been conscious of is the impact of

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a lack of personal access for the seven million people who just don't have access to the Web in their homes. We've all had to retreat behind our doors and work out: How do you get food? How do you see people? How do you work? If you have one Pay as You Go mobile phone in your family and suddenly you have to support your children with home schooling; have to look

after and elderly relatives; have to keep your job going; have to buy basic necessities - do you prioritise the little money you have on ensuring you've got that digital connectivity or do you use it for the basic necessities in front of you?

I think we've seen the divide really widening because we're going to come out of this and see people who've been hit in every aspect of their life because they haven't got that kind of personal access. What's really telling is that obviously with Covid necessity is a motivator. Many of us have experience of being on calls at home, and using Zoom for work and for life has become one of those things that people now just take for granted that we weren't doing before. So, it's driven

some new behaviours but, if you haven't got an employer who's set you up with kit, or you just can't afford it, or you're not in that kind of a role, or you lack the digital skills or confidence to do it, then you've really been very disadvantaged during this time.

**FourForty** | *So, in terms of access there's really three main elements. There's physical access to technology devices - a laptop, a 4G phone. Then there's access in terms of broadband itself - to have a contract with a provider which may be too expensive. Or you may be in a rural area where you're physically not able to get reliable broadband.*

*Then there's access in terms of knowledge. A year ago, how many people had even heard of Zoom let alone knew how to use it? Many people have got top to speed quite quickly, but if you don't know what you don't know in terms of what's available you're in this real 'triple-whammy' of being isolated from digital.*

*Of those three elements, would you say they are all equally important or is getting your hands on the kit the most important thing?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | One of the brilliant things that's happened over this year is the collective effort I've seen across all sectors and all kinds of organisation to recognise that access is a need. There has been a huge focus on providing devices, including voluntary organisations like FutureDotNow through campaigns like DevicesDotNow and other partners coming together to ensure the most vulnerable people have them as a basic necessity. But, that's not enough really. I've heard of people being provided with kit but without the kind of support, confidence-building and reassurance that you're not going to break it or you're not going to suddenly have all of your personal data stolen, it can sit in the corner and people do very little with it.

So, kit's the first step and then ensuring people have data because otherwise they run out and can't sustain what they want to do online. For example, searching for jobs is not an easy thing; you have to be on it all the time but if you don't have data one week, you'll lose out hugely. We've seen how incredible it's been that organisations recognise the need for support. I've found it amazing how they have adapted to standing on people's doorsteps in the rain and talking them

through something, calling them up, spending hours with them when they have a problem. Because, otherwise a device is just another object that sits in your room.

**FourForty** | *I read about about the GTF's Digital Blueprint and 'Gigabit to Give a Bit'. Could you say a bit about this works? It seems like a phenomenal idea.*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | Back in September 2020 we launched a campaign for a 'Great Digital Catch-up' and this was part of it. People don't always use all their data and, actually what's really interesting is that in some communities whether it's here or in other countries, people share resources far more. So, we're really interested and positive about the digital resources we can share and this is partly where both the campaign and that thinking came in.

Within the 'Great Digital Catch-up' a wider picture is the amount of investment going into national broadband infrastructure. As much as we think that's an incredible and powerful thing to be doing there needs to be a recognition that if only a small percentage - 2% - of that investment went into support you could get such a huge return: 4.5 million more people would be online and benefitting and that should hugely help to close the divide.

**FourForty** | *So clearly access to technology is essential. Without that we'll get nowhere. But access to **confidence** and activities that will allow people to boost their awareness and degree of comfort with using that technology is pretty key as well. Pre-Covid there were lots of initiatives out there at the grass-roots level where people were able to meet with peer groups to share their experiences, to realise that 'this is for someone like me', I'm not alone and I can not only learn but can share my own experiences with the group around me and that's a very powerful way to bolster motivation and confidence at that level. In the last year the absence of a physical forum must have had some impact there and whereas in the past you might get people round a table or a more informal basis to show how to do something, showing someone who's never used it before how to use Zoom - via Zoom - is perhaps going to be a bit of a problem. So, have you got any examples of smart initiatives or creative ways that people have got around that? What tips would you give about how to educate people about digital - without using digital?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | It's a really, really interesting one because it's something that last March, just before we went into the first lockdown, we had community partners who said people literally stood in lines outside their buildings and said 'What do I do?' 'Are you still going to be here?' 'How do I get through this?'. And it was heartbreaking because they were the people who, first of all, without physical access were just going to disappear off the map. So, the first thing was getting devices out to people. The second thing was the massive pivot that community sectors have had to do. They've had to go through a huge up-skilling process which has been really challenging because volunteering is something you do it because you think 'This is great, it's

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*social, I can really help'* and you get a lot back from that face-to-face interaction as a volunteer. So, we work with community organisations in our network co-designing resources to support training volunteers and boosting their confidence about how we do things. Instead of immediately switching into how do you teach someone to do something digitally it was 'how

*do you have a virtual coffee morning?' 'How do you create a space that is social?' And it doesn't matter if people turn up late. It doesn't matter if they're still in their dressing gown. It doesn't matter if they're really worried if their sound cuts out. There was a huge sense of being able to give people the reassurance that things do go wrong: it happens all the time, and it happens to everyone. No-one has the perfect day online. So, that was the big focus. I think it was almost putting the need for social connection first which builds back trust.*

It was also about the amount of one-to-one support that started happening. There was a lot more telephone support saying 'This is what we're going to do. This is what it's going to look like. Don't worry if it feels wrong. There's no pressure'. And so it has been resource intensive but what it has done is sustain levels of trust in a community that was still a support network - particularly when we've seen the rise of only being able to access things such as health appointments or prescriptions online. People were doing things a lot more for the first time in a lot of different areas of life and these were stressful things. We're living under pandemic conditions so levels of fear and anxiety are at an all-time high. There is no magic bullet and it takes more time, but I think

you have invest that time and invest in personal relationships and show that you care about that individual. That's been really important in getting people to the point where they can do something digitally that previously they were going to do sat next to someone else.

**FourForty** | *That sounds amazing and almost revelatory for me is the importance of 'informalising' digital. Because, for many, having 'a meeting' or a zoom call sounds like an 'official' thing, when actually it isn't, it's just a chat. So just changing that expectation to become an informal setting: 'Just pop in when you like, there's no pressure' - that's so blindingly obvious when you see it!*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | There was a beautiful example of one group we spoke to recently who were a community arts organisation. They invested in iPads and had a room where they set these up as if people were sat in the room. When everyone came on they looked across the room and saw each other on the iPads and they talked across the room. It was just amazing. Then there are people who have done things to recreate that sense of connection and informality, or sharing things, through WhatsApp which has been brilliant for people because they've also created other communities outside these peer networks that have said things like 'I'm having a rubbish day, Sorry I wasn't able to join. Next time I'd really love to see you ' - and that's kept the momentum going as well.

**FourForty** | *That momentum must be so key for someone low on confidence. It's interesting how you talk about social connection being a pre-condition of digital connection and how that social connection is what engenders trust in the people around you or in the organisation that's providing the training. Clearly there's been a lot of involvement at the corporate level in this type of initiative, especially in the last year. How essential do you think it is to have a well-known brand supporting this type of initiative? Does that immediately not just raise its profile but raise its credibility and value in the eyes of the people you're working with?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | I think it does. Even thinking pre-Covid days and the impact that a kind of initiative like Barclays' Digital Eagles has had in raising awareness and giving support to people who might not have done something like online banking which is a tricky thing for a lot of people.

Trust is a huge issue around finance and personal data and I remember thinking when Barclays came out with that how important that was because it put a human face on something that was a very different behaviour. Banking online still is something that a lot of our community partners say is one of the last things that people do, but actually brand and human interaction can change attitudes dramatically. I think it's a really interesting thing when we have more and more digital services and physical spaces disappear, how for large organisations do you use the brand in terms of human connection? I think it's something that a lot of very large organisations are thinking about as they are challenged with the idea of scale and local: of 'place-based' and personal versus the impact and societal shift that's going on are really difficult things to wrestle with.

Likewise for government as well. Who do you trust in how you make your choices and what you interact with and relatability? We talk about 'relatedness' as a really powerful way of creating trust and that's something that again, I think puts social connection as the point where someone will shift over from maybe a lack of willingness to engage or a lack of awareness about the benefits of digital. The relatability of certain things online to your own life and your own goals and desires and benefits is so critically important. Otherwise, it just feels it's being done to us and there are so many reasons not to do things because there are so many other priorities people have.

**FourForty** | *You mentioned Barclays as being a good example of a brand that's got the right level with this in terms of what they're doing and how they resonate with their audience. Are there any other organisations or sectors generally that you would say have been particularly effective at creating that trust?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | I think for me it's really interesting because when I think about digital it does feel like a thing that produces a product and it therefore has a very commercial side to it. When we talk about digital inclusion that's something very different; that it's not necessarily about an 'economic' thing or benefit. That's the really challenging thing - getting this kind of brand relationship right because it has to feel that there is a two-way benefit. So we work with a lot of great corporate partners who've recognise this and we're doing some brilliant work at the moment with [google.org](https://www.google.org) who've really recognised that supporting people to make decisions about digital is critical in developing digital behaviours.

I think many tech companies recognise there are obviously advantages in terms of their own gains but there is also a big movement around 'responsible tech' and I think that is becoming something that a lot of large organisations start to see as being really critical. It's really important to their reputations as well. But it's finding the line that you tread and it not seeming like a surface gesture. It has to feel like something an organisation has really invested in and you can feel the two-way benefit.

**FourForty** | *Do you feel the pandemic has accelerated that or what is going to happen anyway?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | I think there was an on-going movement over 10 years towards that but I think there will be a regroup and a renewed energy around that at the moment, I think it goes hand in hand with thinking about climate change and green jobs. What's really encouraging is that it's not an either/or option. These are areas of development for the future and actually, they are opportunities. So, starting from the point of a really positive social responsible outlook is critical for organisations now and for attracting younger audiences as well.

**FourForty** | *On that point, do you think that when many organisations talk about 'digital transformation', they are thinking about the benefits to the organisation more than to their customers or users? It can be seen as a great way to save money, to divert people from a call centre to a chat bot for example. Does the whole concept of digital transformation now need to be more balanced - that it's longer enough to ask: 'How can we make easier for ourselves as a brand?' but we should also be asking: 'How can we use technology to make life easier for our customers as well?'*

*So, do you think there are examples of where organisations have got it seriously wrong in terms of misreading what digital transformation needs and how it needs to be more balanced?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | There is a real understanding and hopefully a number of organisations have learned from some of those powerful and painful lessons we've seen. The classic example for a lot

of people we support has been the introduction of Universal Credit and having to interact with a digital service for the first time without many of the digital skills that are required under really stressful circumstances. There's a natural expectation that people feel really disenfranchised as you say.

There is also a lack of trust then when an organisation says it's moving to a kind of digital first service, or digital transformation, that this has been designed for the efficiencies and cost savings that an organisation will have and not for its customers and not for its audience. One of the key

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things is that digital is a great option but it's one option of many which should be provided and unless you're going to provide the support for more people to interact with that digital option in a way which meets their needs then we need to have multiple channels for people to be able to access. Again, I suppose that comes back to our Great Digital Catch Up campaign. Digital

should be a really good option for more people. But, if you don't have the support to provide skills, access and motivation then by doing it you're immediately disadvantaging people and increasing the digital divide.

It's really interesting and refreshing is that I've been talking with a number of different sectors including financial and everyone from water companies, government departments, to charitable sectors and they're all thinking the same. They're all thinking about the customers who probably are not going to use their digital services at the moment and how do they change this? They're not necessarily going to stop having a digital transformation strategy in place but how do they make that more accessible to more people? The other thing I suppose is my biggest takeaway when speaking to government departments is don't start with the digital interface, start back with the person's life because the moment that you're designing the interface you've got it wrong.

**FourForty** | *If there are any heroes you could name please do, because it would be fascinating to share examples of organisations which have really got the balance right.*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | It's really all a work in progress. It's a hard question because services are evolving all the time and the pandemic has meant there are new and increased needs that people have. What I'm really heartened by is that we also work with a lot of local and combined authorities and one of things a lot of authorities are trying to do is think about that place that digital inclusion has in their services. So, a really good example of that is how Leeds Council have thought about and embedded digital inclusion: they're thinking about it when people are accessing housing services, and health services. They're thinking about it with partners in their local ecosystem. I think that if we stop seeing it as a separate thing but as part of either a service solution or a journey we want people to have access to, then it becomes something that's meaningful to people's lives and produces better service outcomes.

**FourForty** | *You've alluded to the importance of looking at people holistically - essentially seeing the context in which they are living their life and what's stopping them from engaging with digital technologies. Which touches on a piece of work you've been doing on a concept called Theory of Change. Could you tell us a bit more about that and how it applies in this space?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | I suppose it goes back to 2017 when I started thinking there's something here about the journey that we need to understand that both individuals go on and then how to bring that into both place-based thinking and organisational culture. This links back to the role of Good Things Foundation as an organisation in both advocating digital inclusion on an individual level and on an organisational and area-based level. The journey's really, really important because too often we talk about black and white in terms of stepping over a divide and we don't acknowledge that individuals and organisations fall back for different reasons - whether as an individual your life circumstances change and therefore to carry on doing something you were doing before is harder, or whether as an organisation your priorities change, your financial situation changes, your key staff who would have carried through and embedded that more digital way of working move on. So, the Theory of Change is really critical in terms of communicating there are multiple steps and when we come back to thinking about how people think about digital inclusion I don't think I've ever heard of anyone coming to one of our centres and saying '*I'm here because I think that I might be digitally excluded!*' What you hear is someone saying '*I can't work anymore*' or '*I'm*

*lonely' or 'I don't know how to do this' or 'What does this letter mean? I can't speak to anyone'.*

So, where I think our Theory of Change is really critical is that there is always a trigger for why digital becomes more relevant in someone's life, that there are ways in which you move people through different stages, and I think going from the point of just building awareness to actually engaging in adopting digital and then going on to being an advocate. I think that's a really important point - the peer-to peer element in changing digital inclusion both in the lives of people around you but also within an organisation is really critical. It just takes someone to say: *'This was so beneficial, because I didn't realise I could do it before and I was worried that I didn't know what I was talking about and actually, by doing this it has saved me money, it's got me a job, it's made me see people who I haven't seen for however long'.*

I think there's something about feeling the value and for organisations it's the same. Until an organisation recognises that actually without embedding digital inclusion they're missing a load of people who weren't actually benefitting from the offer that they had.

**FourForty** | *So, at the risk of invoking the ghost of Adam Smith, is there more that could be done to talk in terms of enlightened self-interest when talking to the world of business, to say that this is not a cost this is an investment. This is a way to increase your value and your trust to your customers and other stakeholders. If there was one thing you'd want to say to that business audience what would it be?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | I don't think it's an option. We've created a myth within society that digital is only going to be a problem for people who didn't grow up with it and maybe at some point that generation won't be with us anymore. We know that's just not true. We know that if you want to retain your customer base, if you want to bring in new customers, not everyone enters at the same level. Unless you have a very narrow idea of your market and audience, with the same level of access to resources and skills, they're going to engage with your digital products. So it's hugely in companies' interests because if you want your market to be as big as possible you have to think about that diversity in society.

Digital exclusion affects someone who is 17 and on the streets as much as it could affect someone who's 77. It shouldn't be something we think will disappear because with the rate at which digital technologies are changing it's so hard for any of us to keep up. The moment we introduce a new

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digital product how can we expect that people will adapt and adjust all the time? We are so inundated with stuff that it's easy actually to just say that's not something I'm going to bother with. In many sectors it's a crowded marketplace so not understanding your audience and not understanding their barriers mean they never

get as far as your product - because it's just too hard. So you're actually doing your organisation a disservice by not thinking this is a need across all markets.

**FourForty** | *Looking towards the future, I've got a theory that many organisations at the moment that have successfully survived the Covid lockdown period but they may not survive the recovery period quite so easily because expectations and behaviours have changed, in some ways subtly, in some ways fundamentally, and many have changed permanently. Do you have any evidence from your own experience of how this enforced journey towards digital adoption has fundamentally changed not just people's behaviour but their expectations about what government, the third sector, and above all, businesses ought to be doing now in terms of recognising them as people rather than as statistics or units that need to be forced into a certain way of engaging with their digital channels? Do you think that this has ironically made it important to be more human and increased the value people put on human interactions given that we've all been forced to engage in 'non-human' ways - so analogue becomes more important and valued than digital?*

**Dr. Al Mathers** | I think the blend is more valued because human interactions plus digital opportunities are where we will head in the future. There is a wake-up call that has happened by necessity that we can't shut the door on and, also, we've had huge success with people doing things digitally for the first time as well as huge challenges.

But, what's needed now is something that creates equality so that everyone has that opportunity to feel that digital is beneficial and not feel that they're alone in trying to work out how. So, I think that a blend is the future and I think it's within workplaces as well. Whether it's the kind of support you get from your community group round the corner, or whether it's at the local government or at a national level there's something about recognising the impact on our own wellbeing and resilience and the need for that support is really critical because digital is the opportunity for many people to do much more in many different areas of life.

So, a blend is the future I think.

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